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To cite: O'Toole, L. and Gordon, J. (2015) 'Can we measure happy, healthy and meaningful lives?' in *Learning for Well-being Magazine*, Issue 1, published by Universal Education Foundation.

## Can we measure happy, healthy and meaningful lives?

By Linda O'Toole and Jean Gordon

What does it mean for children and adults to lead happy, healthy, and meaningful lives in which they feel recognised for who they are, feel as if they belong and have a sense of agency to express themselves?

Over the last decade there has been increasing discussion of how we measure 'progress' in society for individuals and groups, because the methods used for the last 50 years (e.g. GDP) are less and less satisfactory for understanding what makes people happy, satisfied with their lives and more importantly what they need in order to flourish in inclusive and sustainable societies. Macroeconomic statistics, such as GDP, do not provide a sufficiently detailed picture of the living conditions that ordinary people experience (<http://www.oecd.org/statistics/measuring-well-being-and-progress.htm>). Inevitably that leads to questions about the major societal goals formulated (content and process for so doing) and how one measures progress towards them. Significant work has been undertaken by major international organisations such as OECD, which has developed the Better Life Index that includes, for example, 11 topics: housing, income, jobs, community, education, environment, civic engagement, health, life satisfaction, safety and work-life balance.

But who decides on the goals and who decides which topics will be 'measured'? Is this the preserve of experts, research and policy-makers, or are citizens (children and adults) involved in a participatory process? The Paris Declaration, *Promoting citizenship and the common values of freedom, tolerance and non-discrimination through education*, published in March 2015 signed by the Ministers of Education of the EU following the Charlie Hebdo attacks in Paris, stated that the purpose of education is not only to develop knowledge, skills, competences, 'but also to help young people – in close cooperation with parents and families – to become active, responsible, open-minded members of society'. Ministers agreed a number of objectives at EU, national, regional and local levels among which: 'Strengthening the key contribution which education makes to personal development, social inclusion and participation, by imparting

the fundamental values and principles which constitute the foundation of our societies’.

In other words, do equity and inclusion only mean assessing inputs and outcomes (e.g. educational achievement, health indicators, life satisfaction, etc.) or does it mean encouraging and enabling the participation of individuals of all ages in the decisions that affect their lives? Is measuring progress for individuals and society only about the more easily measurable material and immaterial aspects, or is it also about how we experience our lives? What do we need to flourish?

The other articles in this first issue of the Learning for Well-being magazine have taken different perspectives and approaches to discuss what matters for individuals and societies and ways of measuring it. In this final, short article we want to continue that discussion by focusing on implications of ‘starting with the end in mind’. If it is indeed important for people to feel recognised for who they are, feel as if they belong and a sense of agency, what approaches to ‘measurements’ can contribute? We will pay particular attention to children and we start from the purpose of Learning for Well-being – ‘learning to be and become me in the context of the community and society in which I live and to contribute to the community and society in a way that truly nurtures my uniqueness’ (<http://l4wb.org/#/en/home/page/journey-and-vision>). Our focus is inner diversity, because it is generally a neglected element in the discussion. We will briefly present two examples of exercises designed to take more explicit account of inner diversity that can be used in different contexts where children are living, learning and playing and that could also be integrated into classroom practice, as well as future research methods and the development of indicators in the field of children’s well-being.

In recommending that education systems take the well-being of children as their central purpose, Learning for Well-being is focusing on supporting all children to learn and live fully and actively, and to contribute to the communities and societies in which they are growing up. If this is important, then what are the key ingredients for assessing progress in that direction? Recognising every child for who they are, is a critical though too often ignored aspect of equity in learning environments. It is not hard to observe how different people of all ages function, communicate and learn differently, in ways that are specific to each of them. Each of us views and lives our life in its totality – whether in a classroom, playing with friends or at the doctor’s or watching a circus – it’s the same child. So, we need to emphasise both holistic and integrated approaches, encouraging all the sectors that impact on children’s and adults’ lives to work together, and recognise that people experience every different context through and with all of their cognitive, emotional, physical, social and spiritual experiences and needs.

The work of Universal Education Foundation, today the convenor of the Learning for Well-being Community, started in the mid-2000s with an original Voice of Children survey of a representative sample of

grade 10 secondary school students (15-year-olds) in Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine investigating whether they considered their learning environment was conducive to their well-being. While it produced a very interesting and original ‘snapshot’ of the situation, one of the conclusions was the need to also focus on process which led us to concentrate more on certain aspects of the learning processes of individuals. (Awartani et al, 2008)

## 2. Who is ‘the child’?

We often encounter information and formulations that refer to the ‘child’, but this is only an abstraction. There is no such entity as ‘the child.’ Instead, there is only the multiplicity of children with all their unique characteristics, and the immediacy of the one child who stands before you. At the heart of a particular child’s well-being is his or her individual experience and circumstances. No parent, teacher or researcher would argue that all children are the same, and yet, although there has been recent research using micro data – that is, the analysis of various measures of well-being from a single individual – most data is aggregated, generally for a region and sometimes for a sub-group (Lippman, 2009.) As Fattore et al. (2009) conclude, summarising the results of research necessarily loses some of the richness of the information as well as ‘masking the differences between children’.

Differences among children and groups of children (as well as among adults) are characterised in many ways – age, gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status, cultural background, abled/disabled, and so forth. For purposes of cross-cultural and cross-national comparisons, such differences are significant and need to be balanced carefully for aggregated reporting. One of the critical issues facing the development of appropriate measurements is how to account for such differences between individuals and groups, and whether there are constructs of well-being that are equally true for all children in all contexts in all time periods (Lippman, 2009.)

However, in addition to considerations of diversity such as those listed above, there are also more inner forms of diversity that are relatively unexplored in the fields of assessment, measurement, and research. While there are many elements that could be classified as inner differences, we are referring specifically to the unique ways each child learns, communicates, and develops (those ways which are both similar to and distinct from others.) In educational arenas, for example, there has been increasing interest in individualised and personalised approaches for several decades. This interest has been supported by theories about multiple intelligences, learning styles and approaches to learning, and research in the neurosciences on the impact of social and emotional responses in brain functions and behaviour. Despite this growing interest, researchers, and those concerned with measuring, still largely overlook inner diversity, possibly because of perceived and real difficulties in structuring such research.

The first step in taking account of these differences is to recognise that inner diversity plays a role in learning, communicating, working together, and developing our human capacities. Learning for Well-being uses the term 'naturally unique' to express that most differences observed between and among learners are natural expressions of innate functioning (O'Toole and Kropf, 2010). It is through these foundational processes that thoughts, feelings, actions, and beliefs are filtered, organised, and given meaning. A simple example of the patterns of inner diversity is to consider your own natural rhythm and pacing, particularly when confronted with new information. At one end of the continuum is someone who responds rapidly without needing to deliberately place it in context; at the other end is someone who takes time to make sense of the new information within a known context. These reflect natural differences in pacing, but problems emerge when one end of the continuum is considered more desirable, or the only acceptable way. In those cases, those who naturally relate more to the other end of the continuum may be deemed in normative systems to have difficulties or, in extreme cases, disabilities.

What is highly significant is that the differences that we note in children are likely to continue throughout life as dominant patterns of learning and communicating. Adults need to recognise their own patterns of processing for their own sakes, in order to help children notice theirs and so they do not put their expectations of children through the filters of their own ways of processing. With awareness and simple guidelines, practitioners can nurture the multiple expressions that occur and set a course for children to understand their own particular learning processes, which is in fact a component of 'learning to learn' as defined by the EU Key Competence Framework.<sup>1</sup>

### 3. Working with patterns of processing

Linda O'Toole has been engaged in action research with teachers, schools administrators, and students for several decades. Through this work, she has developed a simple framework for understanding differences in how children learn and interact with their environments. Her work is based in praxis, relying on direct observation and inquiry rather than a theoretical model of classifying differences. This has led to the development and testing of various exercises and tools.

The first example was designed to provide background variables for the Voice of Children survey. In analysing large surveys with closed questions using a Likert scale, the main purpose is not to have an in-depth understanding of *why* different people make their different choices, but to identify, for example, trends over a period. However, does everybody who ticks 'sometimes' or 'very like me' do it for the same reasons and from the same standpoint? What if those differences were actually critical to interpreting the results? This is why, in reviewing the Voice of Children

<sup>1</sup> See: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32006H0962> (Website accessed 2/12/15).

survey in Palestine, Universal Education Foundation (UEF) decided to develop a set of questions that could help bridge the gap. The following questions, which are designed as background variables to be correlated with other items in the survey, though they have not yet been tested with a large sample, use a five point Likert scale from 'very much like me' to 'not at all like me.'

- I often don't have enough time to complete tasks the way I like.
- I always prefer to complete one task at a time.
- I need to talk while working on a school assignment.
- I feel the need to physically touch relevant objects as I am learning.
- I need to understand the assignment first on my own before I start working with others.

It was assumed that correlations would appear among certain items in the survey (such as the student-teacher relationship; attitude towards school; classroom atmosphere) and responses to the above questions that explore diversity among the students. For example, if we were to have a question about 'sense of achievement in school' and we found that a majority of all participants reported a positive sense of achievement, but we then found, when we controlled for the first background variable about 'not having enough time', that of the respondents who said this item was highly descriptive of them, only 35% reported a positive sense of achievement at school, this would be an important point of information that could inform teachers' practice.

The second example includes a series of questions that can be used to explore one's own patterns of inner diversity. These questions are appropriate for adults and adolescents, and, with a slight shift in language, can be used with primary school students as well.

Examples of these reflection questions:

1. When you are starting a new assignment or school project, what are the first things you need to know in order to start?  
How do you get this information? Who do you ask?
2. As you begin a new project, how important is it for you to talk to other students? To the teacher? To think quietly on your own? To move around the room (or outside) to observe what others are doing and how they are doing it? To see and manipulate the materials available?
3. Ideally, what is the best way for you to work with other students? For example: talking together at the beginning and continuing to work together; talking freely as you work on separate aspects of the project; working independently and bringing your work together at the end of the project; or some other way?
4. How do you most enjoy gathering information about a project?  
Reading about it? Talking with other students? Having opportunities to experience where the information is being used? Some other way?
5. What kinds of questions do you like to ask? (For example: questions about how much time you have to complete a task? Who will be

working with you?) How and when do you like to ask these questions? (for example: asking whoever is present when the questions occur to you? Asking all your questions at the beginning, one on one with the teacher? )

6. Think about the other students in your classes. In relation to those students how would you describe your own pacing? For example, do you tend to start and finish before other students? Are you often one of the last students to finish? Do you tend to be very fast at some tasks, and not so fast at others? Do you ever feel pressured in order to finish a task or project? When you think about your own pacing in relation to others, do you think you might like more time to do some tasks, and less time to do others? Can you say why that might be so?

If our focus were, for example, on assessment for learning (formative assessment) then recognising patterns of inner diversity could be very important. However much of a real challenge this provides for teachers, taking inner diversity into account in devising classroom assessment practices could help in ensuring that all children can demonstrate what they know and can do. In comprehensive studies of Swedish school children, certain themes emerged as most critical in how students are frequently misunderstood by teachers and other students, and indeed by themselves about their own ways of learning (and therefore their needs), (Bergstrom, 2004). Seemingly small differences in the way children learn – such as one child needing to talk aloud in order to reach a conclusion, whilst another needs to be silent, reach their conclusion and then talk – can have an enormous impact on how they experience various learning environments, as well as how those experiences affect the well-being of individuals and groups. It is always worth remembering that in terms of timing, research indicates that, on average, teachers wait two to three seconds to receive responses to questions from pupils which would mean that the second child might never have an opportunity to respond to most questions in the classroom (Budd Rowe, 1986; Heinze and Erhard, 2006).

Often caregivers and teachers know that children learn in different ways, but they do not know how to work with groups of children with different ways of learning. The most direct strategy is to allow students to understand and share their learning process with teachers and other students. Sometimes adults do not understand that children know a great deal about their own ways of processing, and are able to express it when asked. An example of this comes from two sisters who were asked by their grandmother if they could describe how their brains worked. The younger sister, Madeline who was 8, had no hesitation, but didn't want to verbalise it; she wanted to draw it. The older sister, Cailin, age 10, was quiet for a minute or two, and then said that she too could draw it. In a few minutes they both returned with their drawings, and described them.

Maddie talked of hundreds of control people (like the little person on the left hand side) who live inside her brain and look out the periscope at the top of the brain. (Figure 1) They collect things they see into files and organise them (example: like a spoon is used for soup not spaghetti). All

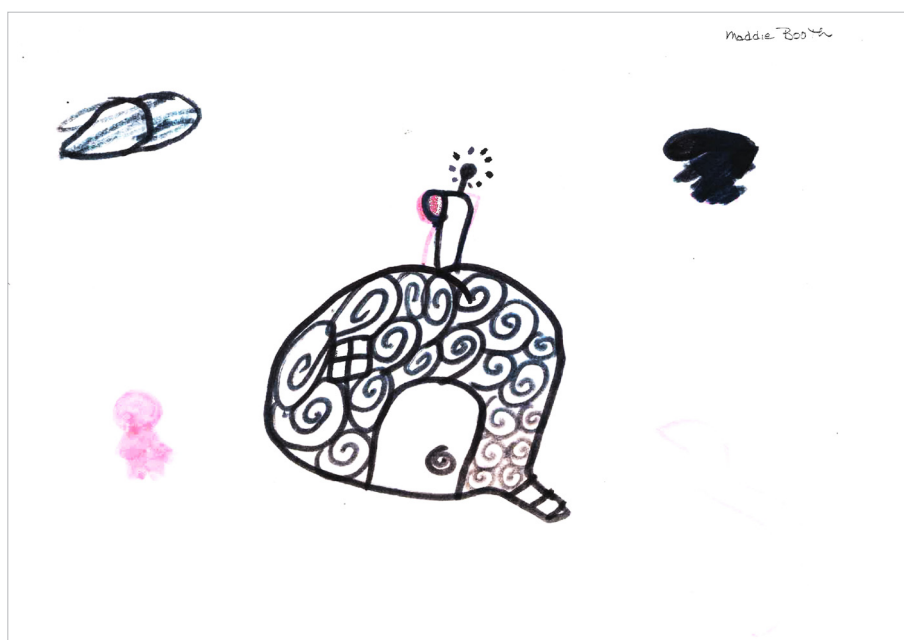


Figure 1

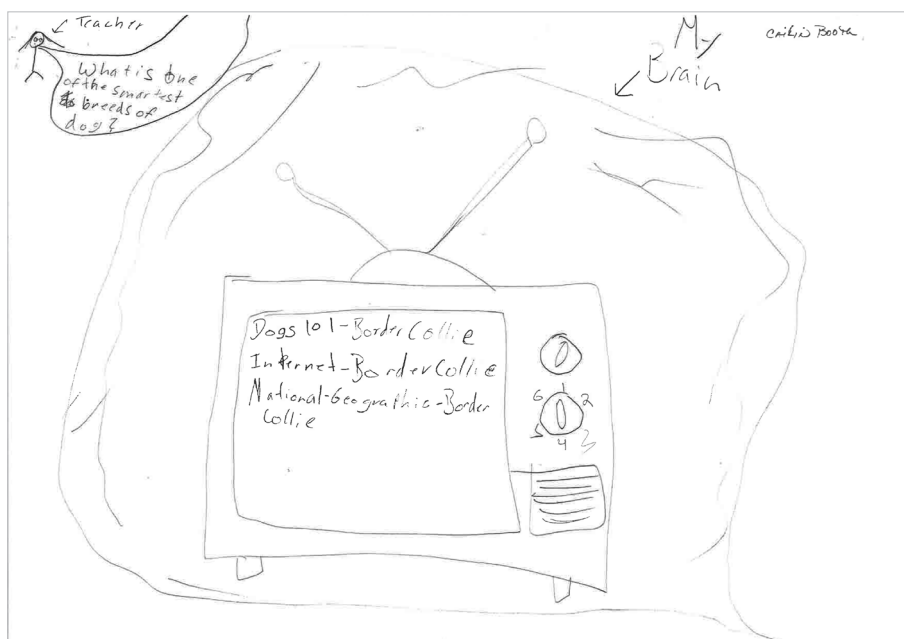


Figure 2

the squiggles inside the head represent the brain as a whole. The door is for the control people to go in and out, and the window lets in the light.

Cailin's story was very different. She drew a teacher asking a question ('What is one of the smartest breeds of dogs?'). She pictured her brain like a big TV set with all the channels. (Figure 2) What she needed to do was find the right channel to tune into. Once she got that channel, then she would investigate her memory: Dogs 101 says Border Collie; the internet says Border Collie; National Geographic says Border Collie. Thus the answer is Border Collie.

Asking an unexpected question and providing multiple ways of responding to that question often leads to interesting interactions, whether in classrooms, research interviews, or within the family. In the illustration of the two sisters, it is clear that the way that they organise information and make decisions likely point in quite different directions from one another; this has implications for their processes of learning, as well as how they communicate their processes.

One can also facilitate the expression of inner diversity by students through relatively simple changes in a classroom setting:

- Provide opportunities that give students a choice about how they undertake an activity, particularly how they choose to begin. Give them various options and be open and explicit about all options having value.
- Allow space and time for reflection both before undertaking a task and when it is complete.
- Encourage self-assessment, according to the learner's own criteria, and allow children to speak about this assessment.

#### 4. Final thoughts

All the articles in this issue, taken individually and collectively, illustrate specific perspectives and understandings that are both individual and societal of how we decide what matters and how we devise different approaches to measuring it. Positive psychology is bringing new perspectives to what constitutes well-being and flourishing in the individual. Many interesting initiatives and research programmes have made available data that give us much more information at aggregate level for large populations about people's lives and human development. Under the influence of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, there has been an increasing understanding of the importance of recognising children as subjects in their own right and encouraging children's participation in all decisions and aspects that affect their lives. This has impacted research, policy and practice and fits within a broader understanding of the importance of active and participatory citizenship if our societies are to evolve towards being more just, inclusive and sustainable. There is, however, no simple answer to how one begins to take account of individual differences in 'measuring what matters' but if we truly want to attempt to measure some of the aspects of life that are less tangible, we need to consider inner diversity as a core element of learning to make decisions and take actions that better serve ourselves, others and the environment.

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